

The Role Of Public Schools In Developing Good Citizens

Unfortunately, there are those who talk of our educational systems as producing a product, as if somehow our elementary and secondary school system is a manufacturing plant with some sort of production line putting out individuals who are capable of taking their place in society. Quality is measured in terms of academic proficiency which supposedly translates into good citizens and competent workers.

This unfortunate tendency leads us to think of schools as some sort of manufacturing organization that produces a product. The quality of the product is defined by "its" (the student's) ability to perform certain pre-assigned tasks at specific levels of competency.

Since we need a sufficient number of people who possess the scientific, technological, and business skills to maintain our competitiveness in the world, the logic continues, it is the job of our educational system to produce individuals (the product) who possess the competencies necessary to meet these manpower requirements.

While competency in math, language, science, history, music, art, and other subjects are all highly desirable qualities, they are not the only, nor even the most important, qualities of good citizenship.

Benjamin Franklin declared that the ability to govern one's passions in spite of temptation, to be just in one's dealings and temperate in one's pleasures were qualities of far more real advantage to a person than being "master of all the arts and sciences in the world besides."

We know how to teach languages, math, and other subjects. But, how do you teach children to govern their passions and to be good neighbors and citizens? How do you teach them to be just in their dealings, to be temperate in their pleasures, to behave with prudence in their affairs, and to support themselves with fortitude under misfortune?

How do you teach these concepts in a public school setting? Where is the opportunity? Where do you get the time or resources? How does character education fit in with our established curriculum?

The most important quality of good citizenship, especially in a free society, is the capacity for responsible self-governance. This means we must not only teach young people such virtues as honesty, respect, and responsibility, but also temperance, self-control, and self-reliance.

Good citizenship is determined more by one's desires than one's knowledge, and less by one's ability than one's character. But how can a teacher appropriately influence a child's desires and help mold his or her character without violating parental concerns or legal requirements for public schools? How can it be done within the limitations of time, resources and opportunity available to the teacher?

Benjamin Franklin answered this question some two-hundred and seventy-seven years ago. His answer? By teaching them how to read the sacred book of nature.

The following excerpt from Benjamin Franklin's *The Art of Virtue* provides valuable insight into the importance of character based learning and a key to creating effective character based lessons.

In the summer of 1730 the *Pennsylvania Gazette* published two dialogues written by Benjamin Franklin titled *Dialogues Concerning Virtue and Pleasure*. The dialogues consist of a conversation between Horatio, a lover of pleasure, and Philocles, a wise philosopher. In the first dialogue, Horatio admits to Philocles that his indiscriminate pursuit of pleasure has caused him a great deal of trouble. Admiring Philocles' freedom from similar cares, Horatio wishes to know his secret. Near the end of their conversation, Philocles explains to Horatio:

Philocles: The chief faculty in man is his reason, His chief good, or that which may be justly called his good, consists in reasonable action. By reasonable actions we understand those actions which are preservative of the human kind and naturally tend to produce real and unmixed happiness; and these actions, by way of distinction, we call actions morally good.

Horatio: You speak very clearly, Philocles; but, that no difficulty may remain on my mind, pray tell me what is the real difference between natural good and evil and moral good and evil.

Philocles: The difference lies only in this: natural good and evil are pleasure and pain; moral good and evil are pleasure or pain produced with intention and design; for it is the intention only that makes the agent morally good or bad.

Horatio: But may not a man with a very good intention do an evil action?

Philocles: Yes; but then he errs in his judgment, though his design be good. If his error is inevitable, or such as, all things considered, he could not help, he is inculpable; but if it arose through want of diligence in forming his judgment about the nature of human actions, he is immoral and culpable.

Horatio: I find, then, that in order to please ourselves rightly, or to do good to others morally, we should take great care of our opinions.

Philocles: Nothing concerns you more; for as the happiness or real good of men consists in right action, and right action cannot be produced without right opinion, it behooves us, above all things in this world, to take care that our own opinions of things be according to the nature of things. The foundation of all virtue and happiness is thinking rightly. He who sees an action is right-that is, naturally tending to good and does it because of that tendency, he only is a moral man; and he alone is capable of that constant, durable, and invariable good which has been the subject of this conversation.

Horatio: How, my dear philosophical guide, shall I be able to know, and determine certainly, what is right and wrong in life?

Philocles: As easily as you distinguish a circle from a square, or light from darkness. Look, Horatio, into the sacred book of nature; read your own nature, and view the relation which other men stand in to you, and you to them, and you will immediately see what constitutes human happiness, and consequently what is right.

Four Points from the above dialogue:

The real good of man consists in right action.

Right action cannot be produced without right opinion

Right opinions are opinions that accord with nature of things, and

Right opinion cannot be obtained without right thinking

While there are those that may chafe at the notion of "right opinions" or even "right thinking", especially when espoused by someone who holds different opinions than themselves, it is doubtful that anyone would argue that all opinions are equally valid or equally beneficial.

If we want to teach young people how to form "right opinions" we need to provide them the training and tools that will help them know how to "think rightly" which is help them learn how to think for themselves. Hence, a critical ingredient of character based learning is helping them develop the thinking skills necessary to look at the sacred book of nature and understand what they are seeing.

This is also a valuable key in preparing character based lessons. If we can get them to see the nature of an act or thought, whether its natural tendency is to improve or injure the human condition, we are well on the way to helping them make right choices.

Nothing can be more natural than to help young people learn how to read the sacred book of nature while teaching them than while teaching them about languages and the meanings of words, or while teaching science and the operations of nature, or history and the accumulated experiences of the human race, or math in which they learn principles of symmetry, structure, and order.

The need exists, the opportunity is there, and the only question that remains is, "Are we up to it?" Surely it is if we keep in mind, not only the future welfare of the children we teach, but also the kind of world we would like to leave them.

By George L. Rogers

Article Source: http://EzineArticles.com/?expert=George_L._Rogers